



Dale Gouford 1985.

# Television Fame?

Most balloon pilots are hams at heart. This goes for most of the chase crew members as well. They love to have people rush up when the balloon lands, and they bask in the glow of public attention as cameras click and questions flow. Ask most of them if this is true and you'll probably get a denial, but just watch them. They are like a mother hen with a bunch of chicks. It's like being a kid again and having the biggest and best toy on the block. We usually printed our Sundancer logo on jackets and T-shirts for all the regular crew members and they not only wore them while on a chase, but anywhere else there was an excuse. They were proud to be a part of the crew and took every chance to display this pride.

This is generally true of all balloonists and their crews. It stood to reason, then, whenever the news media wants a picture of a balloon or a story about ballooning that there are plenty of volunteers. Our crew always seemed to gather its share. The first year we owned Sundancer the local newspaper did a story on us as new owners of a hot air balloon. This was really a followup of a story the previous year when we had been on the chase crew for George's balloon. The third year, though, was the capper. The Christian Broadcasting Network called, wanting to film a story about a hot air ballooning family. The kids were ecstatic and I must admit Judy and I weren't too reluctant either.

The filming was to take place during the first two days of the 1982 Balloon Fiesta. The first morning they planned to

follow us onto the launch field in the dark and film early morning shots; then the cameraman was going to fly with me and film some aerial shots. The second morning they hoped to reshoot material that hadn't gone too well the first day and then the reporter was going to fly away with Judy and me in a spectacular sequence of Sundancer ascending with the rest of the balloons. In the finished film it would all look like it was taken the same day and that the reporter was along on the whole trip. So much for the plans.

The first morning it was still pitch-black outside when the knock came on the door. We looked out at five very bedraggled people. It was probably lucky we had met all of them the night before or we would never have believed they were the CBN crew.

"Anyone want a cup of coffee or hot chocolate?" Judy asked.

"Anything that's hot and black," one man answered, pulling a hand out of his jacket pocket. He looked cold. It had rained hard the night before and the chill was a little more biting than usual.

"You guys simply have no appreciation of morning," Kathy bubbled. She was the star. She really was the co-anchor on an early morning news and talk show where the tape would be shown.

We poured hot drinks for everyone and then left in a cavalcade. On our way we picked up a neighborhood friend of Phil's named Marty. The rest of the chase crew would meet us at the field. The three cars were supposed to stay together. We did all right until we were about two miles from the field. Then we found ourselves locked tight in a traffic jam where two roads merged.

"What do we do now? They wanted to take some pictures of us going into the field," Judy said.

"They'll just have to wait. I'm not even sure we can keep the cars together. Maybe Phil can get some cars to wait and let all three of us go together."

When we reached the intersection Phil jumped out, talked to one of the drivers on the other road, then waved us on. We crept along until we reached the turnoff to the field and then pulled off to the side of the road. The camera crew had a big station wagon with a drop tailgate. We helped them mount a

television camera on the luggage rack and a cameraman stood on the tailgate and tied himself to the luggage rack with some straps. He hoped to get pictures of us driving in with the long line of other ballooning vehicles. However, the rain the night before had turned the normally dusty and bumpy road into a quagmire of ruts and mud. As we pulled back onto the road, I watched the rearview mirror. The whole setup on the station wagon bounced up and down like a pingpong ball and the poor guy standing on the back had his hands full just staying on the tailgate. So much for a good idea.

The fun had just started. The rules at the Fiesta stated that only the vehicle carrying the balloon could drive onto the launch field. When we reached the guard at the gate, he wasn't about to let even a vehicle with a television camera past. We finally rounded up an official and obtained a special pass. Once we had located our assigned launch site I turned to the director.

"What do we do now?"

"Well, we want to get some shots as the sun comes up and some shots of the other balloons inflating. Then, when you get ready just do what you always do and we'll just work around with the camera."

That sounded easy enough. We would be launching in the middle wave so we had some time to kill. Judy and I went to the pilot's briefing and returned across the soggy field. The mud clung to the bottom of our boots until it was like walking with lead shoes and the grass soaked our pants legs. This wasn't like New Mexico. At this time of the year everything was supposed to be crisp and dry. After all, this was supposed to be the desert. We slogged our way back to the truck and soon the first wave of balloons was inflating around us. We had to be ready to inflate right after the first wave launched so we gathered the crew around and started to work. We had just put the burner in place when the director rushed over.

"Say, could you do that over? We want to get a shot."

"Sure, what do you want?"

"Well, first we would like to get a medium shot and then I'd like to get the closeup of you tightening the hose connections with the wrench."

From there on it was a sequence out of Laurel and Hardy. Put the burner on. Take the burner off. Lay the gondola down. Stand the gondola up. "Look that way, we need a profile shot." "Kathy, stand over here like you know what you are doing." One time when I glanced across the field, there was a man taking pictures of an other man taking pictures of the TV crew taking pictures of us. To add to the confusion, balloons were being inflated all around us and every once in a while there would be a shot just too good to turn down and the crew would be momentarily distracted. I couldn't blame them; it was a beautiful sight.

To add to the confusion, our normal crew of hams had suddenly turned camera-shy. Some of them didn't mind being in some of the shots, but some of them avoided the camera like it was a loaded gun. Pretty soon, everything was funny and no one could do anything without dissolving in laughter. My problem was that I still had to get a balloon inflated. At least everyone was good natured and as we laughed and stumbled our way around, the cameras continued to roll. It was a good thing we were in the middle wave or we would have never gotten Sundancer inflated in time.

Once we had the balloon upright, I had to fit the cameraman and his gear into the gondola. This consisted of one large camera, a long microphone with a round foam thing on the end, a videotape recorder, and a battery pack. We had to figure out where to put things so they wouldn't be stepped on and then how the cameraman was going to move a big camera around in such a small confined space and still enable me to fly the balloon. After some experimentation, everything was braced in place and we waited for the launch director.

"I don't think I've ever worked so hard at inflating a balloon in my life," Judy said as she leaned against the side of the basket.

"That's the price of stardom."

"Baloney, I didn't see the camera getting any flattering shots of me. Everytime the camera was pointed in my direction, I was bent over."

"Don't worry about it," Kathy assured us. "Once we do some editing, everything will look great."

I wasn't too sure about that but once we had launched, the whole mess became worthwhile. The rain had cleared the air of the usual dust and pollution and everything sparkled. The wind was moving us to the northwest over the lush green farmland and slow enough so the balloons were staying in a tight pattern. The cameraman was going nuts. In front of us the sky was dotted with balloons of every color and design. Back toward the field, the balloons were coming up like a magic carpet of flowers rising from the ground and then breaking into individual blossoms.

"Hot dawg! We're going to fly across the Rio Grande!" I pointed to a meandering expanse of brown sand and mud in the distance. Down the middle ran a muddy ribbon of water. Several balloons were already settling toward the sandy banks of the river.

"How'd you like to do a Splash and Dash?"

"What's that?" the cameraman asked. He really didn't look too enthusiastic.

"We're going to come in across the water and let the gondola just touch the surface."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Heck, no. It'll only go in a little bit and then we'll pour the heat to her and fly out over the trees on the other side."

As we approached the river, I could see that the balloons ahead of us were coming back across the riverbed once they were down close to the ground. This provided a mixing effect, with the balloons on top going one way and the balloons in the streambed going the opposite way. To do a Splash and Dash we would have to cross the streambed, then sweep back across the river. We crossed to the far side and descended, over the trees, with the gondola almost scraping the top branches. Once we had cleared the edge of the trees, I brought Sundancer down to just above the mud and sand of the riverbottom. The actual river was ahead of us about thirty yards and at this time of the year, it was only a muddy stream about twenty yards wide. It probably wouldn't have been that wide if it hadn't rained the night before. I didn't want to hit the mud, but we would be over the water for just a few seconds; the timing of the splash had to be just right. I was concentrating on the flying and the cameraman was concentrating on the scenery and working

back and forth between taking shots of our progress and filming several balloons that were in the riverbed with us.

"Here we go." Sundancer touched the water and then hit a sandbar just below the surface. The balloon slowed as the edge of the gondola dragged in the sand. Water and some sand were oozing into the bottom of the basket.

"Good grief!" The cameraman looked down in disbelief and almost dropped the mic. We had forgotten about the video recorder in the bottom of the gondola and water was swirling around it. He grabbed for equipment and I poured heat into the envelope. Water and sand continued to rise in the gondola. It was only a few seconds before Sundancer freed herself from the river, but I'm sure the cameraman thought we were sinking for good. At least he stared with a good deal of fascination as his feet disappeared under the water. In the meantime the camera ground merrily on, recording our efforts. At last we swooped back into the sky, and the water and sand drained out of the gondola.

"Did we ruin the equipment?" I asked, more than a little concerned.

"I don't think so. How is the mic?"

"We almost lost it over the side, but I grabbed it before the tip hit the water."

He listened in his earphones, checked the recorder, and then nodded his head. "I think we made it."

We flew on to the west side of the river. It was time to find a place to land. I called the chase crew on the CB radio and they informed me they had crossed the river and had us in sight. The best spot I could find was a long narrow field between the river and an irrigation canal. I started my approach and looked around for a road for the chase crew to come in on. I directed them down a road and across a bridge. The road had a few water filled low places, from the rains the night before, but from above they didn't look too bad. I had descended to about three feet above the ground and we were skimming across a batch of alfalfa.

"Where do I turn?" Judy's voice came across the radio.

"Just across the bridge. You might hurry a little. This field is pretty narrow."



"I just crossed the bridge. We should be able to see you once we top this little--O-o-o-o-h!" and there was silence.

We could see the water splash from where we were, even though we couldn't see the pickup.

"What happened? Are you all right?" I queried.

There was no answer for a few seconds and then the pickup appeared. "I topped this little hill and all I saw was water. I thought we had gone into the canal."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Naw, just a little scared and somewhat soggy." I could hear the laughter in the background.

We touched down and people ran up to the gondola.

"Well, what do you think of ballooning?" I asked Kathy.

"The ballooning is OK, but this chasing is really a kick," she answered, wiping a dab of muddy water from her forehead.

The next day's shooting went off without a hitch and that night we watched the results. It was all we had hoped for. The zoom shots of the balloons were great, the early morning shots were passable, and the Splash and Dash was every bit as funny on tape as it had been in real life. The camera had kept on running. First you saw a shot of the balloons on the river. Then us approaching the river. Suddenly the camera tips down and there is a slightly out-of-focus shot of hands and feet and muddy water. All in all, the television crew had shot over three hours of tape which eventually became four short story segments, each about two and one half minutes long. Everytime we watch this crazy tape, we crack up. So much for our grand adventure into the fabulous world of TV.